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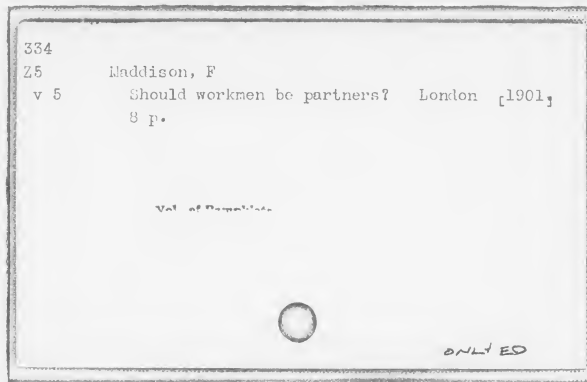
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LABOUR ASSOCIATION

FOR PROMOTING

Co-operative Production based on the Co-partnership of the Workers.

ESTABLISHED 1884.

Central Office: 15, Southampton Row, Holborn, London, W.C.

President: THOMAS BURT, M.P. Hon. Treasurer: ANEURIN WILLIAMS.
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SHOULD WORKMEN BE PARTNERS ?

By F. MADDISON.

IN seeking to find an answer to the question which stands at the head of this paper, we have the advantage of being relieved of the task of making elaborate definitions or of showing that Industrial Co-partnership is not a mere theory, but an established practice. That ground has been so well covered by Mr. Williams in the preceding paper that we can accept his statement of the case and facts as our own, and shall take as proven the proposition that, whether the best system or not, Co-partnership can and does stand the test of the workshop and the mart. In doing this, there is no intention of ignoring the patent fact that as yet this form of industry bears but a very small proportion to the total volume of production, or that it has not even attempted to tackle the problem in some of its most difficult branches. But, when these and all reasonable deductions have been made, it still remains true that what has been accomplished is sufficient assurance that the fundamental principle is a sound one, capable of wide extension. We shall, therefore, assume that Labour Co-partnership is, to adopt the language of the auction-room, a going concern.

But that does not take us very far on our journey, though without such an assurance it would be useless to start. What has to be faced at the outset of this inquiry is the serious demands which

Co-partnership makes on men. They have not only to possess the qualifications of craftsmanship, but to some degree those qualities which we associate with management, or which rank as ability in the phraseology of the economists. That, however, does not exhaust what is required to fit men to become good citizens of an industrial republic, to use Mr. Gerald Balfour's apt phrase. They not only need to employ their brains as shareholders as well as workers, but to display self-denial, loyalty to ideals, the higher comradeship, and other like evidences of moral strength, which combine to produce what we call character. It does not follow, of course, that a Co-partnership workshop can only exist when these demands are fully met by all who are engaged therein, any more than it is necessary for the continuance of the State that all its citizens shall be virtuous, such as those who are vicious retard its permanent progress. The effect, too, of an absence of moral fibre will vary in the different stages in the growth of a Co-partnership Society. But at all periods it is a source of weakness, even to the point of threatening its existence.

This, then, must be accepted as part of the problem to be solved, and not simply as an occasional misfortune which crosses the path of the industrial reformer. The task is not confined to the making of this or that article; it includes the transformation of the human material from its raw state of service for wages to the finished product of industrial freedom and responsibility. Co-partnership in industry is only possible under certain conditions, and one of them is that the worker must be able to subordinate his immediate interests, or what seems so, to the wider and larger well-being of the community of which he forms a part. It is futile to expect that the old order of things can prevail, in which wages alone formed the connecting link between employers and employed. This does not mean that existing standards of hours and wages have to be set aside. On the contrary, they are maintained, and even improved upon, but they only represent the letter of the law; it is the spirit dominating the workshop which makes all the difference between success and failure. It is not enough to say that no man should hire another; the hiring must prove his fitness to govern himself. This is the inherent difficulty which belongs to the attempt to introduce the democratic principle into industry. It involves selection of the fit in the highest sense, at any rate, to the extent of a nucleus, and this means patience and slow development.

To some all this may sound like a counsel of perfection, and therefore as beyond the capacity of ordinary mortals. Fortunately, there are many examples which may be cited of the embodiment of Co-partnership principles in flourishing business concerns at the present day are incontrovertible testimony to their ability to stand the test of everyday wear and tear. A very little character goes a long way, and thus it is that you may have a prosperous undertaking, with a large number of workers, and yet only a few men possessing those qualities to which reference has been made. But there must be a

moral motive power somewhere, though a few men of sterling character and lofty aims may suffice to provide it for large numbers of their fellows. It is not saints of some special order of sanctity who are needed, but simple honest men, who have determined to find a better way to use material things than in the present wage system. In a word, Co-partnership must have the best men and women as pioneers to ensure the successful initial application of its principles, and its permanent prosperity will largely depend upon the number of their successors.

This may appear to be an argument for the cultivation of character rather than for the promotion of partnership in industry. But surely if the connection between the two is so close, if morals and economics blend so harmoniously, then a strong reason has been advanced in favour of this natural combination. As a matter of fact, the strongest indictment of the mere system of hire is that under it men have great difficulty in developing anything but their dexterity as human machines, and sometimes the obstacles to be overcome are insuperable. There is thus an ugly vacuum to be filled if the workers are to have an interest in anything but wages. Co-partnership, we believe, supplies this need by providing not only work and wages, but a sense of possession, which has so far been the strongest incentive to labour. Thus it is that when a claim for the best is made it is justified on the ground that it can be met through Co-partnership in the most perfect manner. If its demands are heavy, so is the satisfaction it gives to those who are capable of complying with them.

And, after all, the scope of selection is wide enough to permit of Co-partnership becoming a powerful factor in our midst. Human nature is better than we sometimes think, and that part of it to be found in the working classes is well up to the average. Of late that hateful word "shirk" has been breathed in connection with some trades, and no doubt it has always had devotees. It may even have been elevated into a doctrine by groups of men here and there, but it has no hold of industrialism as a whole, nor does any union give the sanction of its rules to a policy so disastrous to the commonweal. In fact, it is the faithfulness and industry, not the laziness and dishonesty, which distinguish the masses of the people. Certain writers have been engaged in painting a dark picture of the disordered condition of the artisan class, but they could find material for a much truer and larger presentment of British craftsmen in the diligent service and honourable regard for the interests of employers, often only remotely related to their own, as witnessed every day in factory and workshop, mill and mine. There is, indeed, a rich reserve of splendid human material to draw upon, and Co-partnership, so far from exhausting the store, would continually replenish it.

Some there are, however, who will contend that all this expenditure of moral force would be more profitably employed in establishing the State control of industry. The range of this paper

does not extend to consideration of the respective merits of Individualism and State Socialism, nor is it necessary to travel so far. Co-operation, as we understand it, does not conflict at any point with State or municipal undertakings, although it apparently does with the academic nostrums of some of the apostles of what is called scientific socialism. But even they are unable to deny the imperative necessity for preparing the men and women who are to people their Utopia for their new conditions. Here, then, to them is an use for our Co-partnership Societies—to serve as training schools, stepping stones to higher things in collectivism. In all truth, the man who can conceive of the entire production of the nation, both for home consumption and for abroad, being in the hands of the central authorities we call the State has a faith too large and an imagination too vivid to see in Voluntary Co-operation any obstacle to his desires.

But it is the Trade Unionist who may be expected to subject Co-partnership to the most searching criticism. He has seen so many devices contrived to weaken the power of combination that he is not unnaturally suspicious of any new departure from the old order of things. Capitalists have shown the value of the unions to the workers by the ingenuity of their attempts to get rid of them. Philanthropy has sought to compete with the stern duty the workers owe to themselves as a class, and sometimes with success. Without losing sight of the limitations and even fundamental errors of some of the unions, my deliberate opinion is that the maintenance of the power of combination is more important than anything else, and that, in the long run, having regard to labour as a whole, nothing can compensate for its loss. This, at any rate, is and must be the view of the Trade Union official, and it cannot be ignored in discussing any economic system. Purely as a matter of expediency it must be taken into account. If, of course, trade unions stand in the way of progress they must be resisted, but unless they actually do that the wise course is to co-operate with them.

Indeed, this question of the attitude of organised workmen to Co-partnership Societies would inevitably decide to many minds what answer should be given to the question now before us. Even though they knew the unions to be wrong, the hostility of them, as a settled and concerted policy, would be regarded as likely to be more prejudicial to the cause of labour than would be made up by the advantages of self-employment. Fortunately, no such antagonism exists. Co-partnership workshops are mainly filled with Trade Unionists, and nothing is offered as a bribe or a sop. Whatever is achieved is plus the payment of the standard rate of wages and observance of the hours and general conditions prevailing in the trade. The worker is not lost in the shareholder, but retains all his interests intact in both capacities. It is no absorption, but a harmonising of these functions which is sought. The workers' immediate wants, even if there was no sense of loyalty to those in private workshops, are sufficiently active and real to

prevent any laxity with regard to their assertion. Besides, there is an absence of any adequate motive for indifference to the labour standard—indeed, the danger is all the other way.

So far we have dealt with negatives, useful in their way, but something more is needed for our purpose, which is to sustain the proposition that it is desirable to establish the partnership of labour—desirable not only for the individual worker, but for the nation as a whole. There is an obvious advantage in this dual claim—indeed, nothing short of this is worth our consideration. At the present moment there are alarmist voices in the land, who warn us of coming dangers, some even speak the language of despair. The struggle for trade mastery has been compared unfavourably with the horrors of war, and workmen have been told that their competitors in foreign workshops may inflict more injury and loss than their foes in an enemy's armies. Doubtless there is much of the politician's exaggeration in this, and some of us may even see in it traces of his diplomacy. But, stripped of all excess, the bare truth is sufficiently startling to warrant the immediate and earnest attention of all who love their country. Here is abundant scope for our patriotism. The ultimate fate of England will not be decided by the soldier, but the artisan—not on the battlefield, but in the workshop. He who assists in the task of promoting the industrial efficiency of the Fatherland makes a more lasting contribution to its welfare than the legions who carry fire and sword to the uttermost ends of the earth.

The question, then, of supreme importance, not for one class, but for all, is, How can we hold our own in the international competition of trade and commerce? Clearly this opens up a vast subject, and touches many domains of thought and action. Naturally a variety of remedies have been suggested, and it is quite certain that many will be needed, for there is no sovereign cure-all specific available. But some of the supposed cures are worse than the disease. Not long since a great capitalist lent the authority of his name to the old and pernicious heresy of Protection—for manufactured goods, it is true, but that is only an adoption of the policy of the line of least resistance. Whenever we raise against ourselves hostile tariffs, the agricultural interest, oldest and greatest of them all, must by the very force of circumstances be brought within their sphere. If these islands have fallen so low in the scale of producing nations as to need Protection, then the realisation of those fancy pictures of our decay which have become classics will be the next stage in our history.

There are, however, several obvious reforms which ought to be tackled. Education is one of them, nor is it merely that form of it known as technical. We want more of it and of better quality all round. The mischief is that we do not as a nation really believe in the economic value of education. It is all right for the few, but we have not yet any faith in its advantages for the multitude. This lack of imagination is not confined to any one class, though those

who possess education themselves and yet grudge it for others sin the most heavily against the commonweal. Even a superficial observer cannot fail to see that our most formidable rivals, America and Germany, have the most widely and best educated peoples. Ignorance anywhere is costly, and must tell against progress.

Granting to the full the imperative need of more and better education, will this suffice to secure for us our proper place in the world's markets? To answer this question one has to understand what is actually required. Passing by political and economic considerations as wide of the range of this paper, though many of them have a vital relation to the problem, what we must aim at is industrial efficiency. Now, does this depend solely upon perfect craftsmanship and workshop organisation? If so, then the school-master and the technical expert, along with a well-ordered apprenticeship, will do all that is possible to perfect the natural gifts of the workers. This view, however, ignores the moral factor. Men have not merely heads and hands; they also possess hearts, and they feel as well as think. This is where Co-partnership comes in. Economic law must be obeyed, strict adherence to business methods maintained, workshop training and organisation developed to the utmost, but, supplementing these and all other essentials of successful production, there must also be brought into operation all that is highest in the men themselves. The worst of all restrictions is that which keeps from industry the nobler powers of the human worker. He may give his labour, but does he give himself? It is because we believe that Labour Co-partnership makes it possible for men to approach the nearest to this ideal that we venture to assert that it is desirable, in all the interests that contribute to the commonwealth, that, in some form or other, it should be adopted.

That there is an urgent need for bringing into action all the reserves of human skill and activity requires no proving. The factory system, with its narrow sub-divisions of labour, and the formation of large companies, with their loss of direct contact between employers and employed, have gone a long way to reduce the worker to a mere item in a complicated piece of mechanism, leaving little or no room for the free-play of moral forces in the scheme of production. Under such conditions there must be a ruinous waste, varying, of course, in amount in different trades, and from a variety of causes. Wherever wages form the only connection between the workers and their employment, there is a valuable undeveloped force which might be utilised for the common good. This does not mean that the wage system evokes nothing but the hireling spirit—the triumphs of British industry contradict any such sweeping assertion. My point is that at its best it cannot take possession of the whole of the man. To do that he must own something, have an abiding interest in the work in which he is engaged. Some of our critics speak of this as sheer selfishness, but surely it is only so in the sense that all reforms are. As a matter of fact, it is but an adjustment of the relations between toil and its reward. Co-

partnership provides motive power by satisfying one of the most enduring instincts of human nature, and corrects the excesses of individual aggressiveness by placing the disposition of profits under collective control.

This means that the making of wealth need no longer become a bogey with the workers, who feel free to produce at their best. So long as huge fortunes are being made by a few from the labour of the many, it cannot be expected that the wage-earner will grow enthusiastic over the amassing of wealth. He is far more likely to look upon it as representing the extent to which he has been wronged. And yet the poorest are intimately concerned with the total output of the nation's industry—that is, in the making of wealth. This is all important, for false views on this question may vitiate the entire conception of the problem to be solved. At this point one is often met with a protest against the exaltation of material wealth, and Ruskin's sublime words are made to do duty against us:—

There is no wealth but life. Life, including all its powers of love, of joy, and of admiration. That country is the richest which nourishes the greatest number of noble and happy human beings; that man is richest who, widest helpful influence, both personal and by means of his possessions, over the lives of others.

Exactly—that is our case for Co-partnership. It is the use of this wealth of life that we urge, but in the actual world in which ordinary mortals move the medium for doing this has to be found in the unromantic workshop and factory, the uninviting mill and mine. One thing is clear, Ruskin's ideal can only be reached through labour of hand or brain, and the fullness of life must depend to a large degree upon the intensity of industry. Beautiful phrases have their use, and we cannot have too many of them, but they must touch earth at some point if they are to be transformed into living realities.

To produce freely there must be industrial peace, and that can only exist on anything like a wide and permanent scale when labour satisfies men in higher things than mere wages. It must rest upon a contentment born of equity and a self-conscious participation in the varied interests of industry. Under present conditions it is possible to negotiate treaties of peace between the contending parties, and these conciliatory and common-sense methods ought to be encouraged in every possible way. Trade Union leaders and employers are realising that constant conflict means continuous loss for both sides and for the community as a whole, but labour partnership goes further on the road of peace than mere agreements. It lays a sure and abiding foundation for that deeper harmony which is evolved out of enlarged freedom, which converts the human worker from a hired servant into an industrial citizen. He ceases to be paid by a ruling caste; he shares with equals in the varying fortunes of the undertaking in which he is engaged. This community of interest, even though it may often be imperfect, must

make for peace, not only in the sense of preventing actual strife, but in allaying that irritation and corroding discontent so fatal to whole-hearted service.

It, therefore, comes to this. The individual gets through Co-partnership what he cannot obtain under the wage system alone—a stimulating sense of possession. This represents an enormous economic value, largely dormant as yet, and which is needed to enable us to enter the domain of industrial competition. Workmen should become partners so that they may be free to give of their best, without which the future of England is not assured. We have no right to expect that, imperfect as our national system of education is, the children in our schools, with their mental outlook so much wider than their forefathers, are going to enter the workshops of the land in the same submissive frame of mind as preceding generations of toilers, or as willing to accept rich and poor, employers and employed, as of divine origin and part of the settled order of destiny. That is impossible. The future must witness fundamental changes. What are they to be—evolutionary or revolutionary? Are we to seek a refuge in the State control of all industry, or find salvation in the voluntary application of democracy to production? If the former, then these islands will cease to play a foremost part in the trade and commerce of the world, hopelessly beaten by the fresh vigour and greater freedom of other nations. There is a legitimate domain of State and municipal action, and my remarks must not be construed into an indiscriminate condemnation of collectivism in any form. Co-partnership has the advantage that it unites the welfare of the individual and the nation, without absorbing the former or weakening the latter. Here, then, is abundant scope for all our energies, and an outlet for the most genuine patriotism. They tell us that the Fatherland is threatened by the superior brains and training of other nations. Let us, then, see to it that the race which has held undisputed sway so long as the mistress of industry rallies all its forces to retain it. School-house and technical college must join in this patriotic work. But our endeavours will be lacking if we fail to give to the workers the wherewithal to put heart as well as hands and brains into their labour—that is Co-partnership.

MARCH, 1901.



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